Does Social Policy Meet Social Needs?

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1 Introduction

Social policy is broadly concerned with the public provision of (public or private) goods and services to meet human needs. This article asks whether the actions typically undertaken by the state or statutory agencies to meet a defined set of basic needs – thus falling under the rubric of 'social policy' – succeed in meeting these objectives, and, if not, what steps are needed to remedy the mismatch between provision and needs? In the light of rapidly evolving views on the role of the state in welfare provision, and greater availability of information on the livelihood strategies and coping mechanisms of poor people, we argue that alternative approaches to social policy in low-income economies are urgently needed.

A wide range of definitions of social welfare and social policy is found in the literature.[1] Table 1 presents a fairly comprehensive (though not exhaustive) taxonomy of the programmatic approaches and interventions that fall within this field. These concepts and approaches have evolved over time and vary according to context, at times referring to the *objectives* or *outcomes* of human wellbeing, but more frequently emphasising the *instruments* or *means* of social policy provision, as applied for example to the delivery of specific social welfare and social assistance programmes (see Table 1). In terms of objectives, conventional social policy interventions are generally designed to: (a) ensure access to a range of goods and services to enhance welfare and achieve socially defined objectives; (b) reduce uncertainty or insure against risks or shocks (such as drought or unemployment), to smooth consumption and income over the life cycle. Our focus here is principally on the *objectives* of social policy, and the extent to which current interventions are designed and implemented in ways which meet their goals.

In this article we argue that social policy in the South generally fails to meet social needs. We highlight the often inappropriate transfer of fundamentally northern concepts and programmes to the South, leading to instruments and interventions that reflect northern priorities rather than local realities and that meet assumed rather than identified needs. The identification of needs and the design of interventions tend to be top-down and state-led. In the context of economic reform and

IDS Bulletin Vol 31 No 4 2000

Table 1: The scope of social policy

Social sectors	Health, education, water and sanitation, housing
Social insurance	Pensions, unemployment benefits, disability allowances
Social protection	Food subsidies, targeted safety nets (e.g. public works projects, supplementary feeding, income transfers)
Social services	Care for vulnerable groups (e.g. people with disabilities, elderly people, orphans)
Social rights	Child labour, women's rights, labour codes

adjustment, there has been a shift in many countries from universal or comprehensive social policy programmes to targeted, compensatory measures aimed at maximising the use of limited resources to produce and deliver services more efficiently. These reforms are concerned primarily with the efficiency of financing and delivery mechanisms, again with little reference to the 'target' populations or assessment of the actual outcomes (Morales-Gomez 1999: 6), resulting in a mismatch between the 'demand' and 'supply' of social goods and services.

In examining this mismatch, we attempt to shift the focus of attention from the providers of social goods and services towards their intended beneficiaries, recipients or users. We also explore the *interface* between service providers and service users. The following sections of this article identify generic problems with current forms of social welfare provisioning, suggest criteria for assessing whether social policy meets actual needs, and discuss initial steps which might bridge gaps identified between policy and need. These arguments are illustrated with reference to recent policy initiatives in Malawi.

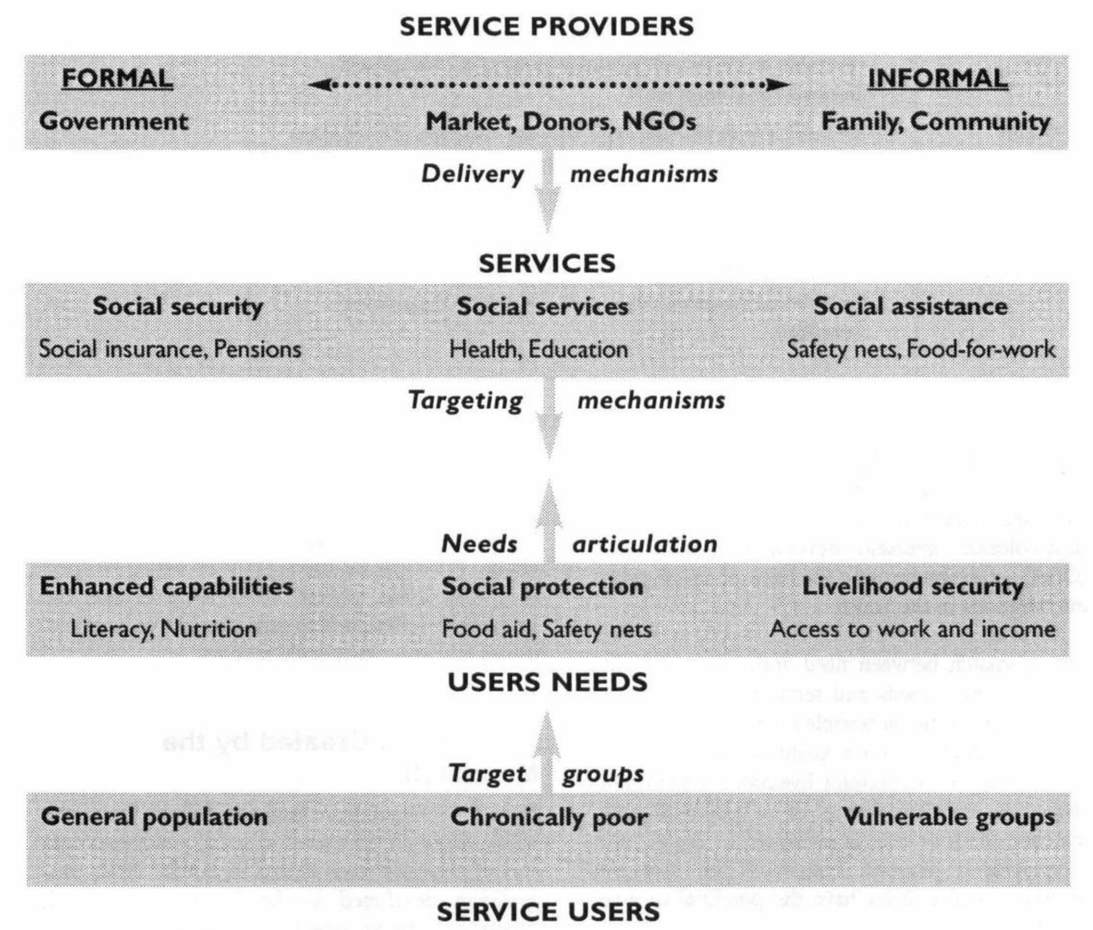
2 The Gap Between Need and Policy

A fundamental criticism of the transfer of northern social policy objectives, programmes and instruments to the South is that they have often assumed a set of needs which does not match local reality (Midgley 1995, 1997). In a world where over 800 million people are malnourished (FAO 1996), for example, it is debatable whether the rural poor in Africa and Asia prioritise primary education or access to modern health care above food security, and thus whether shares of government spending on education and health provide adequate indicators of good social policy. Recent participatory poverty assessments have revealed that the poor attach high priority to livelihood security and minimisation of income variability, but policy-makers rarely give the same weight to risk reduction and income stabilisation as do the poor themselves. The central issue here is the process of decision-making: how are policy choices made, by whom and for whom?

Although resource scarcity is frequently presented as the major constraint to the institutionalisation of comprehensive social policies in poor countries, choices over resource allocation are primarily political decisions, reflecting normative views of socially acceptable outcomes. Moreover, the allocation and use of resources for social policy invariably reflect the interests and priorities of central government policy-makers and the providers of financial and technical support (the international financial institutions and donors), resulting in a top-down design of interventions with little reference to local contexts or understanding of the population groups on whom these policies are targeted. The result is the emergence of a gap between the actual needs and priorities of those targeted or receiving social assistance, on the one hand, and the services provided or the capacity of individuals and households to access these services, on the other. Figure 1 illustrates this 'gap' at the interface between provision and need.

The origins of this mismatch between social policy and social needs can be illuminated by a brief discussion of the development of European social

Figure 1: The gap between need and provision



welfare programmes. These programmes evolved in a context of rapidly urbanising and industrialising economies, at a time when the majority of the population was already dependent on wage labour as their primary source of income. Thus welfare programmes were closely associated with urban labour markets,[2] with social insurance payments depending to a large extent on formal wage employment, and lack of employment (through redundancy, illness or retirement) being the primary contingency conferring eligibility for state assistance. In many cases these programmes were developed in the context of liberal-democratic political systems (such as the UK), with their complex pressures on the state for welfare provision. Alternatively, they emerged under authoritarian regimes seeking legitimacy or instruments to ensure social stability (as in Germany under Bismarck). These economic and political contexts led to strategies for delivering state welfare that were appropriate to local conditions and reflected specific sets of needs at particular historical moments.[3]

The institutionalisation of social welfare programmes in the UK after World War II, for example, followed the priority needs or 'wants' identified by Beveridge in his 1942 report. The 'five giants' of want, ignorance, ill-health, squalor and idleness formed the basis of the British welfare state, with specific interventions established to address these needs – state education, the National Health Service, housing subsidies, unemployment benefits

Table 2: **Criteria for assessing the (mis)match between needs and provision**

Access	Are social goods and services, designed to assist the poor and vulnerable, accessible both physically (in terms of coverage) and financially (in terms of cost)?
Quality	Are social services provided to the poor and vulnerable of an adequate and appropriate standard – or do the poor get poor services?
Relevance	Do services provided for the poor and vulnerable address their actual needs and provide relevant solutions to their self-reported problems?
Fit	Are the design and delivery mechanisms of social services sensitive to the livelihood systems, activities and constraints of the poor and vulnerable?

and state pensions. Similar ideas were then transferred by colonial regimes to very different countries and contexts – later supported as part of post-colonial 'overseas development assistance' (ODA) – thereby forming the basis of social policy interventions in the South.

The mismatch between need and policy can take various forms. Goods and services may simply be not available or not accessible to the poor, they may be inappropriate or of low quality, or they may conflict with aspects of peoples' livelihood systems and strategies. In considering these potential mismatches, the four criteria presented in Table 2 aim to provide a practical framework for assessing whether social policies have the potential to meet social needs.

We will return later in this article to an illustration of how these criteria might be used, with reference to Malawi. In the meantime, old-style public works projects can be taken as a (negative) example. These projects were introduced to poor countries as a safety net intervention that required little adaptation to local conditions. Yet evidence from countless food-for-work evaluations suggests that access to public works employment is invariably constrained because of their small scale, geographic targeting and heavy labour requirements; that cash or agricultural inputs are increasingly perceived by public works employees as a more *relevant* transfer than food; that the *quality* of feeder roads and other physical assets produced by labour-based public works is often inadequate; and that the work offered does not always *fit* with local livelihood systems – it competes for scarce labour during the farming season, and there is a perverse logic in requiring the nutritionally stressed poor to expend energy in return for food. Only by *asking* workers on public works projects about these matters can projects be redesigned to take account of local priorities and context-specific realities.

3 Problems Created by the Mismatch

Several problematic outcomes follow from the wholesale or partial export of social policy concepts and approaches from North to South. First, programmes developed in the European or North American context rapidly became entrenched in bureaucratic structures and delivered vertically, through specialist ministries or government agencies: the ministry of education, ministry of health, department of social services. Such a bureaucratisation of the social sectors established strong vested interests among politicians and civil servants for their continuation along sectoral lines, and set ministries in competition against each other for allocations of scarce public resources. The primary beneficiaries of this zero-sum game tend to be those ministries and population groups (such as the urban middle classes) with the loudest political voice.

More importantly, a sectoralised approach imposes a false structure and set of choices which conceals the complexity of poor people's livelihoods. Central to our argument is the recognition that peoples' lives are not compartmentalised in the way that sector-driven policy suggests, and that this lack of compartmentalisation is most evident among low-income rural populations (where households are characterised by economists as 'production-consumption units'). Individuals, households or 'vulnerable groups' are often assumed by policy-makers to need specific goods and services at particular times or to meet particular contingencies: health care when sick, education only when young, food aid at times of shortage. Some of these demands are predictable and can be anticipated (such as those related to the life-cycle), but others are unexpected and unpredictable (such as those resulting from livelihood shocks). Moreover, poor households invariably face difficult trade-offs between meeting the needs of different individuals within the household, and between meeting immediate survival needs and longer-term livelihood security objectives. We argue that a more holistic and integrated approach to understanding the livelihood strategies of intended beneficiaries or users is essential if social policy is to promote the longer-term security and well-being of poor people in low-income communities.

A second problem, not unrelated to the sectoral approach to welfare provision, is the false distinction that is often drawn between 'social' and 'economic' policy arenas. The creation of welfare programmes has tended to separate social policies from measures defined as promoting economic development, creating a category of interventions which are regarded as subsidiary to the rest of the economy and as passively dependent on the 'productive' sectors for funding (Midgley 1995). Recent processes of economic reform and adjustment have exacerbated this distinction, with their characterisation of social sector expenditure as 'consumption spending' rather than 'productive investment'. The boundaries are particularly blurred or inappropriate in the areas of health and education. Not only can a strong case be made for primary health care and education in terms of meeting both basic needs and universal human rights, but from an economic perspective the term 'human capital' itself implies a recognition of the productivity-enhancing nature of investments in these areas. Economists such as Amartya Sen (1999) have argued forcibly that human and economic development are both impossible without substantial investments in a nation's human capital, so that prioritising education and health care can be justified on both efficiency and equity grounds. Nonetheless, in the policy arena these sectors continue to be marginalised within economic planning and budgetary processes, and they remain the categories of expenditure most vulnerable to cutbacks at times of fiscal austerity. Greater recognition needs to be given to the productivity-enhancing potential of these so-called 'social' sectors and to the economic rationale for government intervention in their provision and financing.[4]

A third limitation following from the importation of top-down, state-led identification of needs and design of social policy is that the resulting interventions tend to be biased towards the urban economy and are often closely articulated with formal labour markets, thus excluding the majority of the poor in developing countries, who are located in rural areas and/or are weakly integrated into formal economic sectors. For instance, especially in the first decades after independence, tertiary education and health facilities in Africa (universities and hospitals) often received disproportionate allocations of government and donor resources, to the relative neglect of primary health care, basic education and adult literacy programmes. This mismatch has only recently been recognised and (at least partially) redressed. Much has been written about the problems of 'urban bias' in development strategies, but the failure to reconceptualise welfare programmes – starting from the actual priorities of groups such as subsistence farmers or informal sector workers – has resulted in a profound and persistent gap between the types of services provided and the real needs of these economically and politically marginalised population groups.

A final problem, from the perspective of consumers of public goods and services, arises from the unreliability of social policies and increasing inaccessibility of services provided. Cutbacks in social sector expenditures in countries experiencing economic crisis or radical adjustment have withdrawn an element of security from the beneficiaries of welfare programmes. 'Fee-free' education and free access to health care, once guaranteed as a citizenship right even in the poorest countries of Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, have become the exception rather

Table 3: New directions for social policy

From	To
Sectoral, compartmentalised approach to poor people's livelihoods, and to policy	Holistic, integrated approach recognising the complexity of poor people's livelihood strategies
Residual or compensatory approach with social policy marginal to the economy	Institutional approach with social programmes integrated into broader development strategies
Top-down, state-led and supply-driven models of social policy provision	Demand-driven approach based on participatory needs identification and design of interventions

than the norm, as access is increasingly rationed by individual ability to pay user charges. At the same time, the 'traditional' institutions and practices through which households previously met basic needs and smoothed their consumption following shocks have been weakened, first by state-led modernising processes which substituted certain types of formal provision for informal mechanisms, and subsequently by the drive towards marketisation which has dismantled these formal provisions. Thus vulnerable populations are increasingly forced to rely on informal social security systems, at a time when these arrangements have been substantially undermined by conflicting social and economic discourses and policy prescriptions.

4 Bridging the Gap

The remainder of this article elaborates on the directions in which we believe social policy should move if it is to overcome the problems identified above and instead address real needs. Some of these new directions are summarised in Table 3.

4.1 From sectoral to integrated – a livelihoods approach

The fact that people's lives are not compartmentalised in the way that public policy might suggest is most apparent at the household or individual level, where decisions about resource allocation are not made along sectoral lines, as at national or government level, but instead reflect the complex trade-offs between competing priorities that the poor make on a daily basis in attempting to achieve livelihood security – for example, in terms of sequencing of asset divestment under stress, or choosing between buying agricultural inputs or paying school fees. Scoones (1998: 5) defines a livelihood as comprising 'the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living'. Livelihood strategies (including options for risk diversification and responses to contingencies) are mediated not only by asset ownership but by the context within which people live, specifically by the range of formal and informal institutions that either constrain or facilitate access to resources and livelihood opportunities. An integrated 'livelihoods approach' to social policy would shift attention away from narrowly sectoral interventions, and would explicitly link the intended outcomes of social policy – improved well-being and reduced vulnerability – to the broader institutional and policy environment.

4.2 From compensatory to institutional – social policy as productive investment

As argued above, the boundaries between the 'social' and 'productive' sectors have been drawn unnecessarily sharply, with investment in health and education being viewed at best as a poor relation to investment in 'productive' economic sectors such as agriculture and industry, and at worst as little more than social welfare for the poor. This bifurcation is pronounced in many low-income countries, where compensatory interventions have been introduced since the late 1980s in response to the social and economic problems exacerbated or caused by the neo-liberal policy agenda. Programmes such as the World Bank's 'social dimensions of adjustment', 'social safety nets', and 'social funds' embrace a wide range of interventions, including short-term job creation, investment in essential services through public works programmes, social assistance and protection for vulnerable groups during transition. In many adjusting economies, these 'compensatory measures' have come to constitute *de facto* social policy, attempting to address problems of structural as well as transitional poverty (Moser 1992), and as an alternative to more comprehensive social sector interventions. Consequently the arena of social policy has become increasingly marginalised from the mainstream of economic policy, while the decline in social investment in support of long-run growth – such as in health and education – undermines longer-term development.

Countries that failed to protect their social sector spending from the fiscal austerity measures imposed by stabilisation and structural adjustment packages have paid a heavy price in terms of human capital formation. Rising infant mortality rates and falling literacy levels, which were recorded in many low-income countries during the 1980s and 1990s,[5] are typically classified as 'social costs of adjustment', but they also represent lost human potential and declining economic productivity. In this context, the Social Summit resolution 'to allocate, on average, 20 per cent of ODA and 20 per cent of the national budget, respectively, on basic social programmes' (UNDP 1995) reflects more than a concern with basic human well-being: it also represents a deliberate effort to reinvigorate economic development, by investing in people. More recently, the World Bank's emerging 'Social Protection' portfolio of activities, under the rubric of 'Social Risk Management', appears to shift the balance towards recognising the developmental (and not just compensatory) role of social interventions. The approach consists of 'public measures intended to assist individuals, households and communities in managing income risks in order to reduce vulnerability, improve consumption smoothing, and enhance equity while contributing to economic development in a participatory manner' (Holzmann and Jorgensen 1999: 3).

4.3 From top-down to participatory – consulting the poor

Reorienting the top-down, supply-driven approach to social policy – the benefits of which are disproportionately captured by a minority of urban, formal sector employees in poor countries – towards interventions that are accessible and relevant to the poor, requires a better understanding of their priorities, constraints and livelihood systems. This in turn requires genuinely participatory mechanisms through which needs can be defined and articulated.

The potential for this kind of analysis is illustrated by a series of 'Consultations with the Poor' (Narayan *et al.* 1999) undertaken during 1999 in 23 countries to provide inputs to the World Development Report 2000/1 on 'Attacking Poverty'. Using participatory research methods, the objective was to understand how poor people themselves experience poverty or ill-being, and what they believe to be the characteristics and causes of their poverty – disaggregated along various axes of difference (gender, class, caste, age, ethnicity, geographic location). The detailed findings of this multi-country project are not relevant to this discussion, but the process generated a number of self-reported perspectives on poverty that suggest a high degree of dissonance with the conventional views of policy-makers concerned with poverty and social policy. For example, the rural poor generally emphasised food insecurity as a central feature of their ill-being, while the urban poor focused more on deficiencies in their physical environment (housing, water, sanitation, crime and violence). More generally, a recurrent theme across all countries and social groups was *insecurity*: 'It's not only wealth that matters – it's peace of mind too' (Brock 1999).

If this evidence was taken seriously, and policy-makers agreed that social policy should address these often intangible issues as well as the 'tangible' social goods and services that governments and donors conventionally deliver, the implications for reformulation of the parameters and programmes under the rubric of social policy would be enormous. Encouragingly, there are some signs that this is beginning to happen. For instance, the emphasis on 'security' in both the (draft) 2000/01 World Development Report (World Bank 2000) and the Department for International Development's (DFID's) 'Economic Well-being' Strategy Paper (DFID 2000), reflects a recognition that insecurity and uncertainty impose severe costs and losses on the poor, not only in economic terms but also in terms of psychological stress and social tensions.

5 Bridging the Gap in Malawi

During the 1990s, poverty and vulnerability intensified in Malawi, already one of the world's poorest countries. Around 40 per cent of Malawians now live in absolute poverty as a result of, *inter alia*, population pressure on the fragile natural resource base, limited livelihood opportunities outside agriculture, and the stratifying impacts of economic liberalisation. Major livelihood shocks during the decade included droughts in 1991, 1994 and 1995; the collapse of the Smallholder Agricultural Credit Association and the removal of fertiliser subsidies; and multiple devaluations of the Malawi kwacha, most recently a massive 62 per cent devaluation in September 1998 after which many commodity prices instantly doubled.

Recent social policy initiatives in Malawi, specifically around safety net design, needs assessment for 'sustainable livelihoods' programming, and education policy, provide instructive examples of the issues raised above.

5.1 Adopting a holistic livelihoods perspective

In 1998, the government of Malawi and the donor community decided that a coordinated, long-term programme of social assistance was urgently needed for the rising numbers of poor Malawians. During 1999 a safety nets programme was designed that would provide consumption transfers to the poorest 30–40 per cent of the population (3–4 million people) for the next twenty years (2000–2020). The National Safety Net Programme is the latest in a series of initiatives aimed at providing social assistance to Malawi's poor against the economic, natural and policy shocks that threaten their precarious livelihoods. This follows the implementation of a Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) programme in 1990, which is widely perceived as having had limited impact, and builds on the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF), which was established in 1995 to mobilise communities for demand-led community sub-projects and to implement labour-intensive public works projects in Malawi's poorest districts. As is typical when wide-ranging policy reforms are addressed only by narrowly targeted projects, SDA interventions such as credit for microprojects 'only reached a small proportion of the vulnerable groups' (Chilowa and Chirwa 1997: 58). Also, although community empowerment was initially seen as the principal component of MASAF, in practice it is the public works activities that have achieved most impact, although again their coverage has been very limited.

The World Bank in Malawi defines social safety nets as 'all programs that provide direct transfers to the poor, in cash or in kind', and explicitly excludes 'programs designed to raise incomes more permanently' (Smith 1999: 5). This distinction – between interventions designed to have only immediate impacts on consumption as opposed to long-run impacts on income – is artificial and marginalises safety nets instead of incorporating them as an integral component within a broader antipoverty strategy. If, instead, a livelihoods framework was adopted, a range of safety net interventions could be conceived that would build on various categories of 'capital' in poor households and communities. For example, community infrastructure projects build *physical capital*, school feeding programmes build *human capital* by encouraging school attendance, microcredit for small enterprises or even seasonal consumption loans offer *financial capital* to the poor, and *social capital* could be strengthened through offering support to carers for AIDS orphans (Devereux 2000). Adopting this broader framework has the potential to shift safety net programmes away from their conventional associations with social welfare handouts, and avoids the very real danger of simply replacing chronic poverty with chronic dependency. More generally, the framework is potentially empowering for the poor, who are all too often characterised as passive 'beneficiaries' or recipients of external assistance.

5.2 Participatory needs assessments

UNDP in Malawi recently drafted a manual on 'participatory assessment and planning for sustainable livelihoods' (PAPSL) which offers an approach that has resonance with the approach suggested in this article. The ultimate objective of the PAPSL philosophy is to 'allow for greater community participation in decision making [leading] to greater community empowerment' (UNDP 1998: 4). The process begins with a 'participatory assessment of the risks, assets, indigenous knowledge base, and coping and adaptive strategies of communities and individuals; [and] analysis of the macro, micro and sectoral policies which influence people's livelihood strategies' (UNDP 1998: 5). Once local livelihood systems are understood and, in particular, an analysis of the constraints that operate to keep people poor has been completed, it becomes possible for communities and individuals to identify opportunities and articulate solutions, not only in terms of external assistance required but also by drawing on their own individual and collective resources. This 'strengths and assets assessment' is as important as the assessment of problems, constraints and needs. A range of participatory techniques are drawn upon, such as village resource mapping, seasonal calendars and trend lines, and the 'NOPS grid' for analysis of 'Needs, Opportunities, Problems and Solutions'.

As in many countries, the Government of Malawi is decentralising to the sub-national (district) level, with the aim of becoming more responsive to local needs. The planning stage of the PAPSL process involves the formulation of 'community action plans' that are intended to feed into local government structures (District Development Committees). Although the implementation of PAPSLs and the process of decentralisation in Malawi are ongoing and yet to be tested, the two mechanisms together offer an outstanding opportunity for truly bottom-up needs assessment and policy planning, reversing the conventional top-down design and delivery of social and economic programmes.

5.3 Access, quality, relevance and fit

The central hypothesis of this article is that social policy inadequately meets the needs of poor and vulnerable citizens because of a disarticulation between actual needs and institutional responses in the following respects: access to essential services may be constrained in terms of both physical location (distance to schools or clinics) and financial barriers (user fees and associated costs); the quality of services is often so poor that their effective impact is negligible; the relevance of services to the expressed or unarticulated needs of the poor is questionable; and the design of services frequently fails to fit with the livelihood systems of their intended beneficiaries. The example of education in Malawi illustrates these concerns.

Access

A review of evidence on public social spending in Africa found that 'government subsidies in education and health care are poorly targeted and indeed favour those who are better-off' (Castro-Leal *et al.* 1999: 49). Using benefit incidence methodology, Castro-Leal *et al.* found that wealthier deciles in Malawi enjoyed significantly higher gross enrolment ratios in primary and secondary education in the early 1990s than the poor. A major deterrent to school attendance was the fees that parents were required to pay. In 1994, the newly elected (post-Banda) UDF government abolished primary school fees, and primary enrolment almost doubled immediately, from 1.8 to 3.2 million learners. Also, in an effort to redress culturally-based gender biases, the USAID-funded GABLE project (Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education) actively encouraged the participation and improved achievement of girls in primary education, and in 1995 the government of Malawi also abolished fees for secondary school girls. Financial barriers remain significant, however: recent evidence suggests that the average Malawian household allocates as much as 20 per cent of its total spending to non-fee education costs such as books, stationery and schools' requests for various 'contributions' (Kadzamira and Rose 2000: 9).

Quality

The overnight introduction of fee-free primary education in Malawi in 1994 had the effect of abruptly increasing demand for education, with no comparable increase in supply of education facilities. Enrolment ratios and class sizes in state schools increased dramatically. The government responded by recruiting 18,000 mainly untrained teachers, lowering the proportion of qualified teachers in Malawi from 84 per cent in 1993 to under 50 per cent by 1997. These factors together resulted in a decline in the quality of education provided to primary school learners, to such an extent that questions are being raised as to whether learners are acquiring even basic literacy and numeracy skills. Lower standards are reflected in rising rates of repetition and drop-outs in the early years of schooling (Kadzamira and Rose 2000: 15), and many parents who can afford the high fees are moving their children to expensive private schools.

Relevance

An unresolved debate in Malawi, as in many other low-income countries, is whether school syllabuses should be reoriented away from conventional textbook subjects towards vocational skills that offer more opportunities for learners to secure formal employment in adult life. Alternatively, both formal and non-formal education (e.g. adult literacy classes) might be designed to better equip learners for the livelihoods they can realistically expect to pursue, such as farming and informal sector activities (e.g. artisanal self-employment). The government argues that this approach is more likely to contribute to the achievement of its poverty alleviation objectives. A related criticism is that the primary school syllabus is geared towards preparing learners for secondary school, which the majority of learners never reach. A proposal currently under consideration is to make the primary cycle terminal, so that learners at least acquire specific skills and competencies before leaving the formal education system. The main argument against this proposal is that parents 'invest' in educating their children because they see this as the family's escape route from poverty, but primary education is not sufficient: 'Secondary education has now become the minimum qualification for entry into the formal job market' (Kadzamira and Rose 2000: 18). There is also something depressingly defeatist (and rather condescending) about seeing the education system as nothing more ambitious than a means of preparing the children of smallholder farmers and petty traders to become (functionally literate and numerate) smallholder farmers and petty traders themselves.

Fit

Thousands of children in Malawi are withdrawn from school at harvest time (May–June each year) to assist on the farm, and the Ministry of Education itself is aware that absenteeism rates are highest at this time. The problem arises because school terms are structured around rigid yet inappropriate calendars, running from January to October with the annual long vacation in November–December (when children have few responsibilities on the farm). The start of the school year also coincides with the 'hungry season', so that learners frequently go to school hungry and perform poorly in class, because their cognitive skills and concentration are impaired. Starting the school year during the months of tightest cash constraints also introduces a deterrent to poor parents to enrol their children and incur costs they cannot afford. In some countries a more flexible approach allows the school calendar to be structured around learners' extra-curricular duties. In nearby Botswana and Namibia, for example, where boys are required to herd livestock from an early age, 'shepherd schools' have been established which offer lessons in the late afternoon when these boys are free to attend. Further thought is needed in Malawi to ensure that school terms and holidays fit better with the agricultural calendar.

6 Conclusion

This article asked the question: 'Does social policy meet social needs?' We have answered in the negative – in poor countries, social policy as conventionally designed and delivered leaves the social needs of the poor inadequately addressed – and identified two related reasons why this is so. The first is that northern models of social provisioning were transplanted to poor countries with little adaptation to local realities. Inappropriate priorities and approaches to designing and implementing social policy were introduced and, especially in countries where donors are powerful drivers of policy, numerous changes were subsequently negotiated or imposed (e.g. the introduction of user charges for social services) that undermined the objective of meeting social needs. The second reason has to do with the top-down and sectoralised nature of social policy planning, which by definition marginalises and excludes the voices of the poor or the 'intended beneficiaries' themselves. Participatory exercises such as the recent 'Consultations with the poor' highlight the profound mismatches that have arisen, as a consequence, between what governments and other agencies actually provide and what people actually need. The article argues for a broader definition and design of social policy, one that does not draw artificial distinctions between 'economic' and 'social' policies, that recognises the complexity and diversity of livelihood systems among different categories of poor people, and that is responsive to articulated needs.

Notes

1. For alternative definitions of social welfare and social security see Burgess and Stern (1989:4); Getubig and Schmidt (1992:1); Midgley (1997:5).
2. See Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of welfare regimes.
3. See Zhou (this volume) for further analysis of comparative models of social welfare.
4. A similar argument can be made with respect to the distinction between 'economic' and 'social' infrastructure (see Moser 1992), which results in schools, clinics and hospitals being categorised as 'social infrastructure', while roads, dams and telecommunications are 'economic infrastructure'.
5. See for instance the evidence for mortality reversals in Zambia during the 1980s (Simms *et al.* 1998).

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